

The first surprise of the morning came early, when I awoke in the hotel both alive and well, and in the presence of my skittish Mother. I was fully anticipating to find an empty room and a dismissive note declaring that my assistance was not appreciated or needed. Instead, she was sitting at the table by the window with a cup of tea in one hand.

“Still here?”

“Hm? You were the one who was so insistent on coming with.”

“That’s right – and you were the one who swore on her life that I wasn’t permitted to follow.”

I hopped out of bed and dug out some fresh clothes from my trunk. The poor thing had been battered to hell by our brief foray into the world of killing cultists. A trio of vicious slashes had shredded the leather that covered the outer surface, though the more resilient interior lining had survived the impact.

“This is what they call domestic bliss,” Veronica joked, “A foggy morning spent with my dearest daughter. How could one ever grow tired of it?”

“You seem to be under the impression that this is my desired outcome. I already made myself clear when we spoke about this the first time – I am not left wanting for a closer relationship with you. You’ve made it clear to me in response that no such outcome is on the cards.”

Veronica didn’t reply. She’d started to learn that sometimes I wasn’t looking for a discussion. We both understood how this dance was done. We both had secrets we wanted to keep for our own reasons and arguing about it wasn’t going to change that. I could see the curiosity, and perhaps a tinge of worry, in her eyes when she regarded me. It must have been a shock to see me stabbing a man to death and then fighting off several more in a violent brawl.

Veronica was immersed in a life of violence – but she must have believed that kids my age were no longer swept from the streets and turned into sleeper agents for the government. I wasn’t entirely sure if that was true, but it was a similar enough line of thinking to what she was venturing down.

She knew Damian, she knew me, so how did it end up this way? How did the child she bore with him transform into a vicious killer while under his watchful eye? It didn't make any sense. There was no reason for me to be this way. I lived in perfect economic security. I could stay in the manor for the rest of my life and never lift a finger.

The biggest, most puzzling element was the skill I demonstrated. It was easy for any boy or girl my age to draw a knife and stab some poor bastard to death in a blind rage, and a loaded gun was easy to discharge on accident too. That wasn't what she witnessed on the train. I moved with purpose and kept a cool head, dispatching every foe with finely tuned intent.

There were too many discrepancies. Veronica knew enough about me to notice them, whereas others like Samantha were capable of filling in the blanks with their own explanations or denials. Veronica spent her entire life lying to other people, she could sniff out when I was being dishonest with her.

Once I was dressed and ready to take on the day, she stood from the table and started to pack away her things. I suspected that the hotel was in contact with her agency, or at least had a cooperative agreement with the government for their officers. She barely said a word to the woman manning the reception.

"I can handle this on my own, you know."

"On your own?" I said sceptically, "There were two dozen of them on that train, and I doubt they're taking a 'less is more' approach to their home base. There must be hundreds of them working on this."

"I know," Veronica smiled, "We captured a handful of them early this morning while they tried to dispose of some incriminating evidence. My colleague was quick to question them about the operation. He concluded that they are working in smaller cells, insulated from possessing too much information about the overall scheme."

"They telegraphed you?"

"Yes. It's very convenient."

When we rescued Damian, I was going to ask him to install one in the house while they repaired the damage.

“Any plans on where to go next then?”

Veronica chuckled, “Not exactly. We have a few leads from those interviews, but nothing solid.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be enough given the time constraint we face.”

“Getting flustered will do us no good. I’ve long since adopted an attitude of being frontward-facing with my work. So long as you keep making progress, however small, you can be confident that you will succeed in protecting the public as an outcome.”

“If you say so. Do you think that Genta can point us in the right direction?”

Veronica clipped her bag shut and sighed, “I’m not expecting much from a brief description of what we know. I hope that with some time and evidence, he will be able to deduce the location of our missing nobles. Or better yet – the police detectives will find them for us and I can move to retrieve them.”

“You mean ‘we’ can move to retrieve them.”

“I don’t understand why you insist on coming with me. Go back home and put your feet up, for goodness’ sake. You’re picking a fight that there’s no reason to participate in.”

“Let’s just say that I’m filled with divine purpose.”

“It sounds to me like you don’t trust the police.”

“At least I know who the police are and what they do. You, on the other hand...”

“I didn’t leave you for dead back on the train. That should be enough proof that I’m on your side.”

“Leave me for dead? You imply it was ever your choice to make. You would have taken a bullet through the chest if not for my intervention.”

“Stop speaking in hypotheticals,” she quipped.

“And the same to you.”

After finishing our morning argument and collecting our stuff, we headed back to the University building where we found Genta. He was waiting on the step out front for us with a small bag of his own.

“Good morning Doctor Cambry.”

“Ah, good morning!”

He was already on edge. Veronica pulled out her notebook and flipped through the pages until she found what she was looking for.

“I promise we won’t take too much of your time, Doctor. I’d like you to come with us and investigate one of the ritual sites that have been found nearby. The detectives have already had their turn scouring it for evidence, and the iconography remains on the floors and walls.”

“Okay, so long as there aren’t any of them lurking around to try and kill us.”

I wanted to assure him that such an event was unlikely given how the cultists were fleeing the scene of the crimes, but I couldn’t. I knew in my gut that if I dared utter the damn words, one of them would leap out from a bush and kill the Doctor before he could offer any useful information to us.

“The police have been camping out there for a full day now. There’s no chance that they come back and try to reclaim it.”

“I would not ascribe rational action to the Scuncath, Miss...”

“Just call me Veronica.”

My ears perked up at that exchange. Veronica wasn’t expecting anyone to ask her for a last name out of politeness. ‘Veronica’ was likely something she made up to use while on the job.

“Miss makes me feel old.”

Or perhaps not.

Genta tilted his head askew, “Old? Forgive me for being so forward, but it is difficult to tell your true age.”

“A lady never tells,” Veronica replied, “But you would be surprised. These crow’s feet don’t lie.”

We walked towards the train station and I crossed my fingers. We’d be lucky if the trains were still running as usual after what happened the day before. It wouldn’t have been overkill to stop them completely until the mess could be cleaned up.

“Did you contact your handlers about the incident?” I whispered.

“They already knew it was me,” she revealed, “I gave them the short version of the tale, and they passed it on to the police.”

“And you can trust them?”

“Trust is a strong word. We have a professional respect for one another. I doubt they’re the one who revealed the operation to the Scuncath. I warned them about that too, and they’re going to put a noose around any information they give out.”

At least they were taking the threat seriously. I was too used to being surrounded by buffoons who always assumed ill-intentioned people would ignore the opportunities they gave them. Beatrice’s Father was lucky I never laid eyes on him again after that party disaster.

Genta adjusted his tie nervously, “I gave what you said yesterday some thought and I think I have a good idea as to what they’re planning.”

Veronica smiled, “You do? Please share.”

“They have my family’s book, which details the best and most efficient ways to summon creatures from beyond the veil. Without that book, they would struggle to bring about more than a creature the size of a rodent, even with a potent sacrifice. The reason the Scuncath have historically failed to implement their schemes is because they do not understand the principles of summoning.”

“Such as?”

“The date and time are important, essential even, the veil weakens and strengthens depending on the fullness of the moon. We have three days until the perfect window arises. They gathered a large collection of powerful sacrifices, those who are rich and influential, to summon a creature which embodies greed. They must be waiting until then to kill them.”

I nodded, “That’s our time limit. It’s somewhat reassuring to know that they may not be dead yet.”

“But it is a very strict time limit,” Genta warned, “They will not hesitate once that window arrives.”

“Does the location matter?”

“I’m afraid not, so long as there is space to draw the summoning circle. The veil exists in a separate plane to our physical world and it can be accessed from anywhere.”

Veronica stepped into the station to buy three tickets while we waited by the door.

“Is there any reason why she’s bringing a young girl with her?”

“I’m her assistant.”

He hummed, “I know that the labour laws were changed recently, but I was not aware that girls your age could still be employed. Is it because the job doesn’t involve manual labour?”

For whatever reason Genta did not draw the more obvious conclusion that I was both Veronica’s daughter and that I was lying to him to cover my tracks. He couldn’t see the wood for the trees, not when it came to handling other people.

“Yes. Let’s go with that. It’s hard to believe that we’re dealing with real, in-the-flesh demons here.”

“It’s paradoxical. Veil entities embody the irrational. The untouchable, the unseen, the experienced. Just like how magic is divided into rational and irrational fields, we can make similar categorisations for living creatures. Horrcath are not unique in that sense. What is unique about them is their capacity for reckless endangerment. They

use their heightened intelligence to kill and maim rather than explore more erudite fields.”

“Do you mean to say that there are more creatures beyond the veil? Ones who can’t be used as weapons?”

“Oh yes, very much so! Intra-veil research is the true, ultimate purpose of what we do at the University. With time, we’ve come to believe that there are a great many disparate beings that exist there and that not all of them are hostile. Of course, the previous generations who wished to use Veil entities as weapons considered those harmless creatures to be a failed summoning. It is illustrative of how violence can blind people to the complexity of our universe.”

“You’re right. That which cannot be utilised to harm others is discarded quickly and willingly.”

Veronica returned, “Luckily for us – the trains are moving again. I think that my friend made them hurry up and reopen the line. It’ll be a short trip to the scene, two stops.”

Genta’s mood turned more pensive once we boarded the train. This time, Veronica didn’t force me to ask twice when it came to choosing a booth that let us watch both sides of the carriage. What do you know? An old dog can learn some new tricks, not that she would ever admit that.

The clock in my head was ticking. We needed to hurry and find some answers.

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The Channery County jailhouse was a relatively modest building on the east side of the town centre. Once intended to hold the offices of two to three constables, the organisation had ballooned in size over the preceding years with the arrival of more people who found it a convenient location from which to reach the nearby train station. Instead of three part-time constables who handled requests on an as-needed basis, they were now fully employed and salaried government agents.

More constables could congregate in the area when there was a demand for them. That was rare. Towns like Channery didn't tend to attract troublemakers. It was the denser areas of the newly industrialised cities that became hotspots for crime.

The constables were widely respected by the community – they had to be. Consent and trust went hand in hand and no constable could do their job without the cooperation of the locals. They wanted their town to be safe and crime-free, and it was essential for constables to showcase their own motivation in reaching that goal.

A hated constable was an ineffective constable, though that did not preclude some from abusing their position in secrecy. Such under-the-table offences were easy to achieve in a system where there was little oversight from a higher authority.

Samantha knew the three constables by name; Walter Fernwell, Fran Chalmers, and John Jones. There was usually only one of them on duty at a time, but stepping through the doors to the front office made it clear that all three constables were on deck and ready for action.

Samantha had never seen Constable Jones in such a panic before. He completely ignored her walking through the door and grabbed a stack of papers from one of the desks, hurrying around a corner and out of sight. The sounds of slicing and shuffling filled the air.

“Is now a bad time, Mister Jones?”

He peered around the corner and exhaled, “To be truthful, it is, but I can't turn away folk who need a helping hand now, can I? It's nice to see you again Sam. Your Pa's told me every darn thing that's happened since you started going to the Royal Academy. No need to get me caught up.”

The noises coming from the building's back rooms, where the cells were located, was evidence enough to Samantha that a lot of rowdy strangers who rolled into town had managed to get into trouble by drinking too much, and getting into scraps with the locals.

“Let me out of here, you lousy hick bastard!”



Jones shook his head, “I’ve never seen nothin’ like it. This lot rolled into the village and drank until the tavern was dry, and then started fighting each other once the residents cleared out to avoid getting dragged into the tussle.”

“Where are they all coming from?” Samantha pondered.

“I don’t rightly know. They run their mouths, but never share anything useful.” Jones looked to her two friends, “You got two strangers with you right now. Introduce me!”

“I promise that they aren’t as much trouble as that lot.”

“Just a little trouble?” Jones snickered.

“Yeah – a little. This is Claudius and this is Maxwell.”

“Nice to meet you, lads.”

Claude shook his hand, “You probably know my Father already. He’s a police Captain in the next district over. Captain Wile.”

Jones’ eyes lit up in recognition, “You’re Captain Wile’s lad? Small world, isn’t it.”

Max did the same and shook in greeting, “We came out here to get away from some of the chaos going on, but it looks like it followed us here.”

“They aren’t going to be causing any more chaos on my watch, I can promise you that! I’m rustling up the other constables, even the ones who are off rotation, so that we can handle all of these cases that are sprouting up.”

Max quickly got to the point of their visit; “I think I have some information that you’ll find useful, Constable. I recognized one of the men in town just now, and I’m afraid of the implications.”

“You did? Let me write it down before I forget.”

Jones grabbed a pencil from his desk and a clean piece of writing paper.

Max kept his voice low to avoid agitating the men in the cells, “I believe that these strangers are the Scuncath who kidnapped all of those people, including my Father. One of the men in town was at our house last night. I swear. I’d never forget an ugly mug like that.”

Jones paused, "You think so?"

"Absolutely."

Jones thought on it. The longer he did, the more it made sense. A deluge of total strangers rolling into town, whom behaved violently and without restraint, and seemingly staying in an unknown location despite the lack of available lodgings in Channery.

It was a good place to hide. There were many abandoned buildings off the beaten path, places that people rarely dared to venture without an explicit reason. Channery straddled the line between being obscure and having the supplies and infrastructure needed to feed a gang of criminals.

"Crap. If that's true, I'd need to send a letter to the Chief, and Goddess knows how long it'll take to get there."

"Can you not handle it yourself?" Max inquired.

"I know you want to see these monsters put away but there are only three of us working this route. We're already swamped in work thanks to them getting into drunken brawls, filing reports and contacting the court in Bruta. If they still have the numbers and weapons they used to kidnap those folks, we'll need backup, a lot of it."

Max nodded, "I understand. I appreciate your honesty, Constable."

"Chin up though, lad. I imagine that they'll come down on this place like a swarm once that letter reaches the right people. They won't have time to get away. This has been a huge black eye for the police. They want to repair their reputation and fast."

"It's not as if they could have predicted something this serious. Aren't the Scuncath infamous for their volatility?"

"True, but they had to get their weapons somewhere. There'll be a lot of questions for the big-wigs who run the WISD."

"The WISD?"

“The Walser Internal Security Division. They were founded about a decade ago to take care of the information-gathering duties that the police couldn’t find time for. They’re a public agency – but most people don’t even know they exist. If anyone so much as sneezes in the wrong place, they’re supposed to know about it.”

“Oh! I’ve heard of them before. They’re like an agency of spies who do all kinds of crazy stuff,” Claude declared.

Constable Jones chuckled, “I’m afraid it’s a lot less interesting than you imagine. A lot of them do boring desk work, pushing paper and sending telegrams.”

“Let me have this,” Claude pleaded, “They have to have at least one or two trained killers on the team!”

Max joined in, “Oh? Like Maria?”

Claude turned on his friend with a stern expression, “Exactly. They could have trained her from birth. How else would you explain her incredible athletic prowess?”

“She runs laps around the school every morning when she wakes up,” Samantha explained, “Hardly a skill that she needs to be taught at a spy agency. She always says that a healthy body is a healthy mind.”

Though in truth – Samantha was being enticed by the idea. Maria had so far insisted that she learnt her skills alone, in isolation from any outside influence. That never made any sense to Sam. Running laps was one issue, but there was also her immense talent when it came to fighting out of dangerous situations. She also boasted a seemingly endless library of important principles that allowed her to remain anonymous. That wisdom didn’t come from nowhere.

If it was true, then Maria would have a good reason to keep it quiet. Samantha didn’t expect to be handed all of her darkest secrets right away. Heck, even she was keeping a big secret from Maria in regards to their discussion with the Goddess. Trust was to be earned, not given as a matter of courtesy.

“All I’ll say is that the committee report into the Van Walser family’s dealings post compromise concluded that there were no ‘child assassins’ like the tabloids love to theorize,” Jones finished. He was very well read for an officer placed into a rural post.

Max tried to get matters back on track, “I’m not entirely certain that what I saw was right, but it was the impression that I got. I felt like he was there during the attack.”

“Hey, that’s okay. A lot of folks who come to us with reports aren’t one-hundred-percent sure either. It’s our job to look into it.”

Jones did expect it to be an issue. He couldn’t bring the young lad into the back and run an identification line-up. The office had already received a warning about that kind of lackadaisical procedure, not to mention the risk of agitating them any further.

“Can you describe him to me?”

Max took a seat and rubbed his forehead as he tried to conjure up the image of the person in question. It was tougher than he thought it would be, given how clear and instinctual his reaction was when he saw him. That shock did not translate into a comprehensive description of his appearance.

“Okay. Let me think for a moment.”

The Constable spent the next ten minutes helping Max work out the details by asking a series of questions about his distinguishing features. As they got closer to the end, he became more confident in his recollection and the underlying accusation that he was at the manor during the massacre.

In the end – Jones got the picture. He was tall, balding, with a mean sneer and was wearing a long brown coat. That would be enough to collar him in a town this small, but Max added some extra details, including a distinctive scar on his top lip.

“We can grab him and bring him in for questioning, but I’m still going to send a letter to the Chief. There’s no time to waste second guessing ourselves.”

Max stood from the chair, “I wouldn’t want to be a bother.”

“Don’t think of it like that, lad. Any lead on where they’ve gone is helpful. Trust your gut a little.”

“I’ll try.”

With their report submitted and Jones moving to alert the authorities, Samantha and the gang headed back to the door.

“Oh, and if you see Constable Fernwell, tell him that I need to talk with him. I have no idea where he went and I don’t have time to go looking!”

“Will do!” Samantha replied.

When the trio found themselves back on the main road, Max exhaled through his nose and considered what he’d seen.

“The police here are much friendlier than in the city,” Claude observed.

“That’s because they don’t have to worry as much as they do,” Samantha explained, “But you don’t find harder or more honest workers than in Channery. Jones will see it right.”

“I hope so.”

“You okay, Max?”

Max nodded, “Yeah. I don’t doubt his sincerity, it’s just frustrating to hear that it might take a long time for word to reach the right people. Who knows what they’re planning on doing while we wait?”

Samantha couldn’t answer that in a satisfying way. She was worried too.

“...Since we’re all here, why don’t I show you some of the local landmarks? It might take your mind off of things for an hour or two.”

Max agreed, “Alright. I’m sure you can show us a side of Channery that Claude could never hope to.”

“I never promised that I was as informed as one of the locals,” Claude griped, “I haven’t seen my Aunt in years!”

Samantha led them away from the office.

Her plan was working already – they were arguing like usual.

